

# USING FEDERAL DATA SOURCES FOR HOUSING ADVOCACY

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The past year has brought significant threats to the quality and even the existence of federal data sources. The United States Department of Agriculture announced that it would cut funding to collect and report their data on food insecurity, the nation's preeminent measure of food hardships, at a time when food insecurity is expected to increase due to federal policy changes; the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration will no longer track major weather disasters whose damages exceed \$1 billion, and FEMA removed its Future Risk Index which projected future losses due to major hazards, while the frequency and costs of disasters are increasing; and the Justice Department and Census Bureau have removed or modified questions of gender identify from multiple surveys, including the National Crime Victimization Survey and the Survey on Sexual Victimization, despite trans people being significantly more likely to experience violent crime. Additional threats to the federal data system include a significant reduction in skilled staff to implement national surveys, growing distrust among potential survey participants about the security and confidential nature of their responses, especially among immigrants, and a move to make participation in the American Community Survey (ACS) voluntary rather than mandatory, which could significantly reduce the response rate and quality of the most significant annual snapshot of the U.S. population, including household incomes, housing costs, and housing cost burdens for communities across the country.

Advocates across multiple sectors, including housing, should work to protect the federal data system by speaking to legislators about the importance of specific datasets. Housing advocates have long used federal data to measure, visualize, and communicate their communities' unmet housing needs to inform policy at the national, state, and local levels. Data from the ACS,

for example, allow us to quantify the critical housing shortage for extremely low-income renters and the racial disparities in housing affordability. HUD's Picture of Subsidized Households (<https://tr.ee/N9XRxn>), meanwhile, shows the quantity and geographic distribution of HUD-subsidized housing. Nonprofit organizations also include federal data in accessible third-party public data platforms, like the [National Housing Preservation Database \(https://tr.ee/rw1z1D\)](https://tr.ee/rw1z1D).

The following section provides a brief overview of federal data sources for housing advocacy. Using these sources, NLIHC produces reports like [The Gap \(https://nlihc.org/gap\)](https://nlihc.org/gap) and [Out of Reach \(https://nlihc.org/oor\)](https://nlihc.org/oor), and advocacy materials like housing profiles for each state and congressional district, which help advocates highlight the significant shortages of affordable housing for extremely low-income renters. The profiles can be found at <https://nlihc.org/housing-needs-by-state> by selecting the state and then clicking on the Resources tab.

## Housing Need and Supply

### COMPREHENSIVE HOUSING AFFORDABILITY STRATEGY DATA

See <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/cp.html>

The U.S. Census Bureau provides HUD with custom tabulations of ACS data that show housing problems among households of different income levels. The Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy (CHAS) data are primarily used by Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)-entitled communities in their HUD-required Consolidated Plans, but they can also be useful for housing advocates in measuring the housing needs in their community. CHAS data use HUD-defined income limits to categorize households as extremely low-, very low-, and low-income. The data also count the number of housing units affordable to each of these

income groups. Therefore, the data provide a count of households at different income levels and the number of housing units affordable to them at the national, state, and local levels. The data also provide important information on cost burdens, overcrowding, and inadequate kitchen and plumbing organized by income level. Further, data can also be broken down by race, elderly/non-elderly status, household size, and disability status.

The most recent CHAS data are from the 2017-2021 ACS. HUD provides a web-based query tool that makes commonly used CHAS data, particularly housing cost burdens, readily available to communities. The CHAS raw data can be downloaded for more detailed analyses.

NLIHC uses CHAS data to estimate the shortage (or surplus) of rental housing by income category for every county and place in the U.S. These estimates can be obtained by contacting the NLIHC research team at [research@nlihc.org](mailto:research@nlihc.org).

## HUD POINT-IN-TIME COUNT AND HOUSING INVENTORY COUNT

See <https://www.hudexchange.info/homelessness-assistance/ahar/#2024-reports> and <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/ahar.html>

HUD's Point-in-Time (PIT) count is the primary tool for measuring the extent of homelessness in the nation. Continuums of Care (CoC) that provide housing and services to people experiencing homelessness must conduct a count each January of sheltered homeless persons in emergency shelter, transitional housing, and safe havens. A separate count is conducted every other January (every two years) of unsheltered homeless persons whose primary nighttime residence is not ordinarily used as a regular place to sleep, such as a car, park, abandoned building, or bus or train station. Although not required, HUD encourages CoCs to conduct an annual count of unsheltered homeless persons.

PIT count is a labor-intensive task coordinated at the local level. The result is a point-in-time estimate of the number of people experiencing homelessness

in the U.S. and among specific subpopulations, such as individuals, families with children, veterans, unaccompanied youth, and the chronically homeless. These estimates are published in HUD's Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness produces a series of research briefs on the state of the homeless, including by race, gender, and geography, using PIT data. These are available at <https://endhomelessness.org/state-of-homelessness/>.

The Housing Inventory Count is an inventory of beds available for the homeless population by program, including emergency shelters, supportive housing, and rapid rehousing.

## FAIR MARKET RENTS

See <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/fmr.html>

Fair Market Rents (FMRs) are published by HUD each year for every metropolitan area and nonmetropolitan county in the U.S. FMRs represent the estimated cost of a modest apartment for a household planning to move. They are used to determine payment standards for Housing Choice Vouchers (HCVs), initial renewal rents for some expiring project-based Section 8 contracts, and initial rents in the Moderate Rehabilitation Single Room Occupancy program. FMRs also serve as rent ceilings for the HOME Investments Partnership program and the Emergency Solutions Grants program.

FMRs are typically set at the 40th percentile of gross rents, which is the top end of the price range that movers could expect to pay for the cheapest 40% of apartments.

## SMALL AREA FAIR MARKET RENTS

See <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/fmr/smallarea/index.html#year2026>

Small Area FMRs reflect rents for U.S. postal ZIP codes, while traditional FMRs reflect a single rent standard for an entire metropolitan region or county. Local public housing agencies in 65 metropolitan areas are required to use Small Area FMRs rather than traditional FMRs to set voucher payment standards that are better aligned

with neighborhood-scale rental markets, resulting in relatively higher subsidies in neighborhoods with more expensive rents and lower subsidies in neighborhoods with lower rents. Small Area FMRs are intended to help households use vouchers in higher opportunity neighborhoods.

## AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY (ACS)

See <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/data.html>

Tutorials on obtaining and using ACS data are available at <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/guidance/training-presentations.html>

The ACS is a nationwide mandatory survey of approximately 3.5 million addresses conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. The survey is distributed on a rolling basis, with approximately 295,000 housing units surveyed each month. Annual data provide timely information on the demographic, economic, and housing characteristics of the nation, each state, the District of Columbia, and other jurisdictions with at least 65,000 residents.

The sample size from one year of ACS data is not large enough to draw annual estimates for smaller populations. To produce estimates for smaller areas, the Census Bureau combines multiple years of ACS data. Five-year ACS data provide a five-year moving average for all communities, down to census tracts. The five-year data are not as timely as the annual data, but they are more reliable (because of the larger sample) and available for many more communities. ACS data are often used by federal agencies to determine how money is distributed across the country.

The ACS provides housing advocates with important information. For example, the ACS captures data on housing costs and household income, allowing us to calculate the prevalence of housing cost burdens across communities by race and ethnicity. Other important variables in the ACS include household type and employment.

The data also allow us to measure the shortage (or surplus) of housing for various income groups. NLIHC uses the ACS Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS)

(<https://tr.ee/SMKOSJ>) to produce its annual report, *The Gap: A Shortage of Affordable Homes*, which estimates the shortage of affordable rental housing in each state, DC, and the largest metropolitan areas.

## AMERICAN HOUSING SURVEY

See <http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/ahs.html> (<https://tr.ee/ZHGHe>).

The national American Housing Survey (AHS) is a longitudinal survey of housing units that provides information on the size, composition, and quality of the nation's housing stock. It is funded and directed by HUD and conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau every odd numbered year. The AHS is unique in that it follows the same housing units over time. The survey includes questions about the physical characteristics and quality of housing units and about their occupants, so users can identify how the price, quality, and occupants of dwellings change over time. The same sample of housing units were followed from 1985 to 2013 with changes to the sample to account for new construction, demolitions, and conversions.

A new national sample of housing units was drawn for the 2015 AHS. The core national sample represents the nation plus its 15 largest metropolitan areas. For the first time in 2015, HUD-assisted units were identified through administrative data and oversampled to produce more reliable comparisons between subsidized and unsubsidized housing. Supplemental samples in the AHS provide data for additional metropolitan areas, contingent upon HUD's budget. HUD planned to draw a new sample of housing units for the 2025 AHS. The agency also announced in 2025 a switch from periodic data collection of typically five months every other year to a continuous model of data collection. Data collection for the 2025 AHS has been delayed to at least 2026.

The AHS includes supplemental questions that rotate in and out of the questionnaire from survey to survey. The 2015 AHS included supplemental questions on food security, healthy homes, housing counseling, and neighborhood arts and culture. The 2017 AHS included supplemental questions on delinquent housing payments, disaster preparedness, and commuting. The 2019 AHS included supplemental questions on

food security, accessibility of homes for persons with disabilities, and post-secondary education. The 2021 AHS included supplemental questions on household pets, secondhand smoke, housing search, wildfire risk, and delinquent housing payments. The 2023 AHS included supplemental questions on housing insecurity, healthy homes, parents' place of birth, power outages, sexual orientation and gender identity, first generation homeowners, heat risk, cooling problems, and disaster related moves.

The AHS is the data source for HUD's Worst Case Housing Needs Report, which is provided to Congress every two years. This report identifies the number of very low-income households in the U.S. who either spend more than half of their income on housing or live in severely physically inadequate housing. The AHS sample is not large enough to calculate estimates for specific states or smaller areas other than the metropolitan areas for which HUD includes a supplemental sample.

## Publicly Assisted Housing

### HOUSING CHOICE VOUCHER (HCV) DATA DASHBOARD

See <https://www.hud.gov/helping-americans/public-indian-housing-hcv-dashboard>

The HCV Data Dashboard provides budget and unit utilization, spending trends, average per unit costs, reserves, and other information about the HCV program for states and individual Public Housing Authorities.

### PICTURE OF SUBSIDIZED HOUSEHOLDS

See <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/assthsq.html>

HUD's Picture of Subsidized Households provides data on the location and occupants of HUD's federally subsidized housing stock. The programs represented in the dataset are Public Housing, Housing Choice Vouchers, Moderate Rehabilitation, Project Based Section 8, the Rent Supplement and Rental Assistance Project, Section 236, Section 202, and Section 811.

This dataset allows users to examine the income, age, disability status, household type, and racial distribution of occupants in subsidized housing at the national, state, metropolitan area, city, Public Housing Agency, and project level. The data also include the poverty rate and percentage of minorities in census tracts of subsidized developments to examine the extent to which subsidized housing is concentrated in high-poverty or high-minority neighborhoods.

### NATIONAL HOUSING PRESERVATION DATABASE

See <http://www.preservationdatabase.org/>

The National Housing Preservation Database (NHPD) was created by NLIHC and the Public and Affordable Housing Research Corporation to provide communities and housing advocates with the information they need to effectively identify and preserve subsidized housing at risk of being lost from the affordable housing stock. NHPD is an online database of properties subsidized by federal housing programs, including HUD Project-Based Rental Assistance, Section 202, Section 811, Public Housing, the National Housing Trust Fund, HOME, USDA Rural Development (RD) housing programs, and the Low Income Housing Tax Credit. This unique dataset includes the earliest date at which a property's subsidies might expire and property characteristics significant in influencing whether the subsidized property might be at risk of leaving the subsidized housing stock, such as neighborhood location and ownership information.

## Other Data Sources

### HUD EGIS DATA STOREFRONT

See <http://hudgis-hud.opendata.arcgis.com/>

HUD eGIS Data Storefront is a geospatial data portal that provides users with access to multiple HUD datasets, including Community Development activities, HUD-insured multifamily properties, and other rental housing assistance programs. The portal also provides access to HUD's mapping tools.

## “HOME MORTGAGE DISCLOSURE ACT” (HMDA) DATA

See <https://ffiec.cfpb.gov/data-publication/>

The “Home Mortgage Disclosure Act” requires many lending institutions to publicly report information about mortgage applications and their outcomes. The information that institutions report includes whether the mortgage application was for a home purchase, home improvement, or refinancing; the type of loan (e.g., conventional, FHA); mortgage amount; the applicant’s race, ethnicity, gender, and age; whether the application was approved; census tract of the property’s location; and other features of the mortgage. These data can help identify discriminatory lending practices and determine the extent to which lenders meet the mortgage investment needs of communities. Small lenders and those with offices only in nonmetropolitan areas are not required to report data.

## OTHER SURVEYS

The [Current Population Survey \(CPS\) \(www.census.gov/cps\)](http://www.census.gov/cps) is a joint venture between the Department of Labor and the Census Bureau and is the primary source of labor force statistics for the U.S. population. The CPS Annual Social and Economic Supplement provides official estimates of income, the poverty rate, and health insurance coverage of the non-institutionalized population.

The [Housing Vacancy Survey \(www.census.gov/housing/hvs\)](http://www.census.gov/housing/hvs) is a supplement of the CPS that quantifies rental and homeowner vacancy rates, characteristics of vacant units, and the overall homeownership rate for states and the 75 largest metropolitan areas.

The [Survey of Market Absorption \(www.census.gov/programs-surveys/soma.html\)](http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/soma.html) is a HUD-sponsored survey conducted by the Census Bureau of newly constructed multifamily units. Each month, a sample of new residential buildings containing five or more units is selected for the survey. An initial three-month survey collects data on amenities, rent or sales price levels,

number of units, type of building, and the number of units taken off the market (absorbed). Follow-up surveys can be conducted at six, nine, and 12 months. The data provide the absorption rate of new multifamily housing.

The Rental Housing Finance Survey (<https://tr.ee/4XihIB>) is a HUD-sponsored survey, first conducted by the Census Bureau in 2012, that collects data on the financial, managerial, and physical characteristics of rental properties nationwide. Data are released triennially. Owners or property managers are surveyed about operating costs and revenue characteristics for the rental housing stock.

## What Advocates Should Know and Say to Legislators

High-quality data that accurately reflect the U.S. population requires participation. Housing advocates should encourage everyone to fully participate in the Decennial Census, ACS, and other federal surveys for which they are selected. The accuracy and reliability of the government’s primary data products depend on it.

When speaking with members of Congress, Housing advocates should remind them of the importance of reliable and unbiased data. Specific highlights include:

- ACS and other Census data are used to responsibly allocate trillions of federal dollars to their states and Congressional Districts ([Ross 2023, https://tr.ee/Rlloaw](#)).
- Measuring the needs and challenges of their constituents—like food insecurity, housing cost burdens, and labor market conditions—is more difficult, if not impossible, without reliable and accurate federal data.
- Adequate funding and staff levels for the ACS, AHS, and other federal surveys are imperative for up-to-date, accurate, and reliable data regarding the nation’s housing supply and needs. ACS data are the foundation for HUD’s fair market rents and income-eligibility thresholds.

- Accurate and reliable surveys rely on the participation of a wide range of residents. Distrust in whether participants could be identified and how their data will be used can limit participation and reduce the accuracy of federal data.
- Participation in the ACS needs to remain mandatory. Changing the ACS to a voluntary survey would lower response rates and decrease the reliability of the survey's findings without the Census Bureau spending millions of additional dollars each year to send the survey to a larger number of households and to conduct in-person or phone follow-ups to encourage participation.

## For More Information

The [Census Project \(https://tr.ee/4LgYm5\)](https://tr.ee/4LgYm5) is a network of national, state, and local organizations that advocates for sufficient funding and support for an inclusive and accurate U.S. Decennial Census and ACS.

The [Association of Public Data Users \(https://tr.ee/daBhTx\)](https://tr.ee/daBhTx) advocates to strengthen and protect federal statistical agencies and programs.

[HUD's Office of Policy Development and Research \(https://tr.ee/ESJOSM\)](https://tr.ee/ESJOSM) hosts research, publications, and data sets on housing and community development.